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Gender and Racial Studies: Reading Response 1

Our gender and racial identities are understood in terms of the socially constructed world. This also affects how we perceive ourselves in relation to cultural ideologies. In this paper, I will discuss how binary thinking affects our perceptions of ourselves and the people around us, as well as how it defines each person's specific racial and gender identities.

In class, we discussed three different excerpts, which focused on three different aspects of the human identity. They touched on the subjects of sexuality, gender roles, and race. I will first discuss how sexual and gender identities are defined by the culture that surrounds us and the roles that are defined for us as heterosexual **or** homosexual, male **or** female. In our culture, there are specific attributes assigned to specific sexes. In relation to sports, there are requirements and tests to ensure that a man does not enter a women's competition where they could, possibly, have an advantage based on their size or how strong they are. On this, Lorber quotes Carlson in saying that "In the Olympics, in cases of chromosomal ambiguity, a woman must undergo a 'battery of gynecological and physical exams to see if she is 'female' enough to compete. Men are not tested.'" (41). She also goes on to say that this practice only seems that it is fair because they are assuming that all men are basically the same size and they are all basically the same strength, but yet they are still all different from women (41). If a woman wants to try out for football, or hockey they are discouraged and sometimes outright denied. Many people feel that a woman couldn't survive on the football field, when the truth is that she is probably the same size as some of the other players. The same thing goes with hockey. My friend tried out for the hockey team at our high school and they told her that she couldn't play because they didn't think

that she could be aggressive enough because she was a girl and that she would be too “at risk” for injury. She was livid.

These selections all emphasize the fact that gender roles are based primarily in history. If, historically, women were more dominant, then maybe our focus today wouldn't involve Monday night football, or Saturday afternoons filled with men's basketball. Maybe, instead, everyone would be sitting around the living room watching gymnastics, figure skating, or even *women's* basketball (that is assuming that women would have gained as much prevalence in the sports world as men have). On top of being told that we can't do certain things because we are women, we are also considered to have defects, or disabilities. PMS is commonly blamed for all things under the sun, including memory loss and passive-aggressive behavior. According to Lorber, “*all* women in the United States are considered unfit for certain kinds of work and physical activity because of their procreative physiology” (46). If this were true, then women simply could not do some of the jobs that men do, which we have found to be untrue. Formerly, men were the only ones allowed to be lawyers, basketball players, CEOs, and even mechanics. Now, women have started to land jobs that were previously held only by men, and while they are still paid less for those jobs than men are, they are making strides. Just the other day, I went to the garage and I realized that I was shocked when a female came up to me and asked me what I needed done. When I told her, she said “OK, great! I'll get right on that.” and she proceeded to work on my car. Historically, women have been the “lesser gender”, and that is why we have such a hard time playing “catch-up” to men. The world is designed for us to fail, and we must work around that.

In science, women are also assumed to take a passive role, especially when it comes to procreation. Here, I will discuss how culture and cultural norms shape how scientists talk about

the “natural world”, and their discoveries. Women, while we are the ones who carry the weight associated with pregnancy, are considered to have taken no active role in the making of that child (at least not biologically). Because women have, historically, been the “second-class citizens”, the men are the ones who are thought to have done all of the work. While men used to be the only ones that worked, women now are starting to get out into the workforce more and more. This shift in the job market has created many not so obvious changes in thinking. In The Egg and the Sperm, Martin states that menstruation is described as the “debris of the uterine lining, the result of necrosis, or death of tissue”. In contrast, the male reproductive system is referred to in an entirely different light. Martin also quotes a text written by Vander, Sherman, and Luciano, which speaks highly of the male reproductive system saying, “...Perhaps the most amazing characteristic of spermatogenesis is its sheer magnitude: the normal human male may manufacture several hundred million sperm per day.” (486) Some of the terminology that is used in medical texts such as “the female *sheds*” and “seminiferous tubules *produce*”(486) also implies that the male’s system is of greater value to reproduction than the female’s system.

transition?

Before the 1950’s people were believe to be either white, or non-white. This idea came about because of immigration. So many people wanted to immigrate to the United States, that the government had to come up with a way to stop immigration patterns and to keep US citizenship limited to “white people”. While many people thought that they had a good sense of who they were as people, they found themselves being denied citizenship because they weren’t “white” enough to become a citizen. Next, I will discuss how racial identity is defined by the social construction of the world, and how culture plays a big part in how many people feel about different “races”. Common knowledge and scientific evidence are thought to be the main

rationales that the courts used in determining who were which race. In White Lines, Haney states “Race can be understood as the historically contingent social systems of meaning that attach to the elements of morphology and ancestry.” (14) Throughout the years, society has come to associate skin color/appearance with race, not because it necessarily is correct, but because it has become of such popular opinion. This is the same for the material world. The spread of poverty and wealth has come to be associated with race, and because of that, it has been spread to newer generations and will continue to be spread in such a manner that culture dictates who is which race, based upon how they live. For example, when someone lives in a very nice neighborhood with beautiful houses, green lawns, large backyards, and fancy cars and a black family moves in to the house that was up for sale for a few weeks, there is some shock. No matter how open people claim to be to other races, there is no stopping the thought that those people “don’t belong”. This thought has been carefully, and unknowingly, cultivated over the years and festers just below the surface of each and every human being.

In many of the prerequisite cases between 1879 and 1952, the courts were required to determine not only who was white, but also why they *were* white. Throughout the course of events, it was shown that white was not only the opposite of non-white, but it was the “superior opposite”(Haney 28). These terms given to non-whites are merely that: terms. Not a single person has ever seen a red person, or a black person, or a yellow, white, or brown person. No one person could ever fit into the social terms used to describe them as an **entire** race. I certainly am not white (although I am fairly close!) and my boyfriend certainly is not black. I would be quite frightened if I woke up one day and he was black. He is, however, “African American” if you can call it that. His family is from Haiti and Canada, and I’m sure somewhere in his lineage he has relatives from Africa, and although he may refer to himself as “black” and maintain that

he attends a “Historically Black College”, he is not black, and nor are any of his friends that I have met.

So, in an effort to bring a sense of conclusiveness to this essay, when we think in terms of black and white, male and female, straight and gay, we limit ourselves from so many possibilities. This thinking is precisely the reason that our society functions the way that it does. This binary thinking is exactly the reason that we have discrimination and prejudices. It is why we have judgment and racism. This form of thinking affects our lives not only on a personal level but also on a social level. Each and every person in this world contributes, however minutely, to our culture, and when people can't open their minds to new things, and new ways of thinking, we are severely limited in our ability to move forward and to break past the barriers that we have set out for ourselves. In this way, if we have a culture that cannot change, then how are we going to have any way of changing how we identify ourselves with a particular sex, race, or lifestyle? We can't.

Bibliography

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